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WHEN EXCLUSION REPLACES EXPLOITATION: THE CONDITION OF THE SURPLUS-POPULATION UNDER NEOLIBERALISM

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Introduction

In 1992, 13 years after Margaret Thatcher's "neoliberal revolution," the Iron Lady's chief economic advisor, Alan Budd, declared that he had his doubts that "the 1980's policies of attacking inflation by squeezing the economy and public spending" had ever really been taken seriously by those at the helm of government. Rather, he wondered if they weren't really a "cover to bash the workers. Raising unemployment," he pointed out, "was a very desirable way of reducing the strength

of the working class. What was engineered—in Marxist terms—was a crisis of capitalism which re-created a reserve army of labor, and has allowed the capitalists to make high profits ever since.”¹ The interest of this anecdote is in its implicit suggestion of a link between the socio-political destabilization and fragmentation of the wage-earning working class (the intensification, in other words, of the difference between the working army of labour and the unemployed reserve) and the politics pursued during the decades following the rise of neoliberalism. The central problem with which we are confronted today, in other words, may be less the conflict between labor and capital, and more, as Margaret Thatcher put it, the antagonism between a privileged “underclass” with its “dependency culture” and an “active” proletariat whose taxes pay for a system of “entitlements” and “handouts.”²

During this same period, in France, André Gorz published his *Farewell to the Working Class*—a book in which he argued that the “society of unemployment” would henceforth be divided into two camps: “a growing mass of the permanently unemployed” on one side, “an aristocracy of tenured workers” on the other, and, lodged between the two, “a proletariat of temporary workers.”³ Far from constituting the very motor of social change, the “traditional working class” had become little more than a “privileged minority.”⁴ From now on, the vanguard of the class struggle would be a “non-class” made up of the “unemployed” and “the temporary workers” for whom work would never be a “source of individual flourishing.” Gorz’s idea was that, in today’s world, class conflict is no longer between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but rather, between the lumpenproletariat and a working class no longer at odds with the class system.

The fact that this logic—redefining the social question as a conflict between two factions of the proletariat rather than between capital and labor—can today be found on the left as well as the right, raises a number of question. On one side, it aims at limiting the social rights of the “surplus population”⁵ by pitting “active” workers against them; on the other side, it aims at mobilizing the “surplus population” against the privilege of the

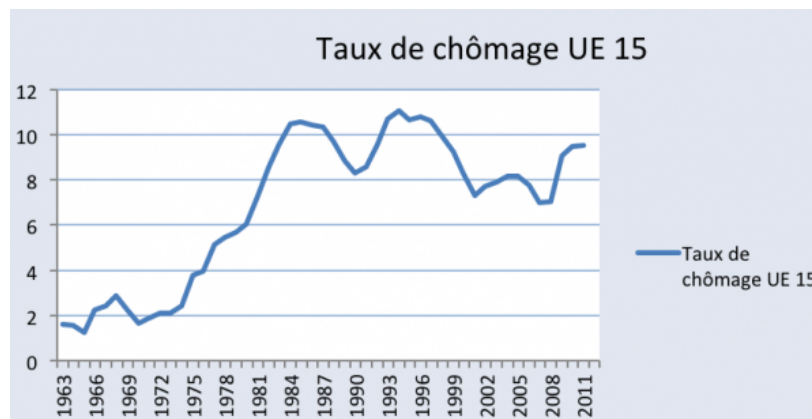
“actives.” In the end, both sides end up accepting, to the detriment of all “workers,” the centrality of the category of the “excluded.”

This simultaneously semantic and ideological evolution in some sense reproduces the changes that have taken place in the salariat over the last forty years. Increasing unemployment that is also increasingly concentrated (both socially and geographically) and the consequent emergence of a vast stratum of (what Marx called) the “surplus population” thus figure as key elements for understanding the structural reconfiguration of the salariat in the whole of the industrialized world. It has pushed to center stage a set of political debates about “unemployed youth left adrift,” “the beggars and the homeless” and “postcolonial immigrants without documents or support.” These new protagonists of the urban proletariat now become, as Loic Wacquant pointed out, “the living and threatening incarnation” of the instability generated by “the erosion of stable and homogenous wage work” and “the decomposition of the solidarities of class and culture it underpinned within a clearly circumscribed national framework.”⁶ This same evolution becomes the condition of possibility both of the various conservative political strategies aimed at limiting access to the Welfare State and of the declining “centrality of the working class question”⁷ among authors and critics on the left. Now the “exploited” are redefined “by their exclusion,” by their increasingly precarious relationship to work (*précarisation*).⁸ In their new invisibility, they constitute a symbol of the reconfiguration of class (as well as ethnic and gender) relations in a society where the explosion of inequality and economic instability has profoundly dismantled the working class. Indeed, their invisibility is a kind of image of neoliberalism, of the replacement of class struggle by unorganized uprisings and class consciousness by the fragmented identitarianism of a deeply fissured salariat. Although this problematic gets articulated differently in different countries, the question of the “surplus population” in all its declensions (the unemployed, the impoverished, immigrants, the excluded, the underclass, the insecurely employed, etc.) finds itself at the heart of both public and expert debate on the economy, on the left and on the right in the decades following the 1980s. The transformations of the

period go beyond the issue of how the economy is organized to the issue of how the social question will be asked in the future. Indeed, in debates that are as much intellectual as political, the new centrality of the “excluded” or the “underclass” not only changes the terms of the problem but also of what can count as a solution.

A New Problem Arises...

Between 1963 and 1983, unemployment rates skyrocketed from under 2% to at least 10% in every main industrialized European country. This transformation, as much of the structure of the wage-system as of work itself was perhaps one of the most important of the post-war period, profoundly altering the terms of political and economic discussion. Unemployment had remained relatively low in the post-War period but the following years marked the end of the “30 glorious” years of European post-war peace and prosperity. If the old objective had been “full employment,” the new one was just less unemployment, i.e. “reducing [an] unemployment” rate which had somehow managed to settle in “for good.” A new consensus had begun to emerge: unemployment was not “just a conjunctural phenomenon,” but appeared to be caused by structural factors.⁹



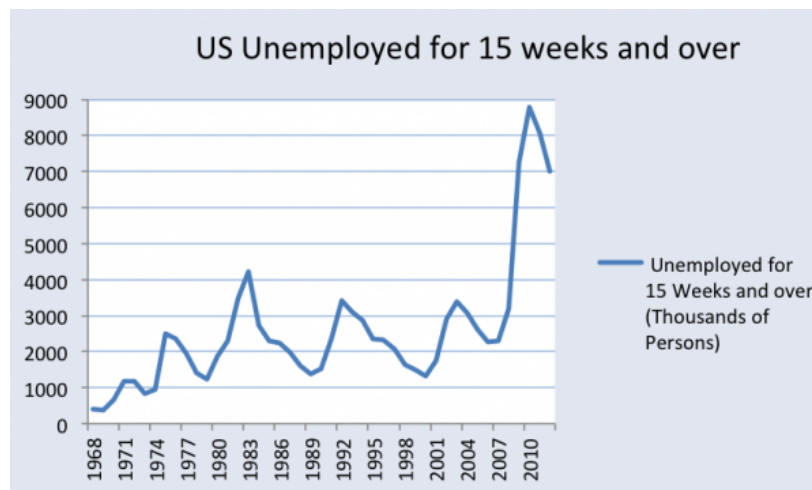
Source: OCED

To this explosion of unemployment were added two relatively new considerations: its increasing duration and its concentration within the workforce. What was thus established was a deep correlation between, on one hand, the increase of unemployment rates and, on the other, the length of time spent unemployed.



Source: O. Blanchard 2005

What this means is that the rise in unemployment hit a relatively small group very hard while sparing the rest. In Germany, for instance, between 1975 and 2004, 70% of all periods of unemployment were localized in barely 10% of the population.¹⁰ In this regard—and in this regard alone—the new segment of the workforce (the poor, the unemployed, immigrants) did indeed become relatively isolated from other active wage-earners. And although the United States in this period saw a less significant rise in unemployment, the 1970s and '80s nonetheless did see an increase both in the numbers and in the length of unemployment. Furthermore, insofar as unemployment and poverty also became increasingly concentrated geographically—as is suggested by the evolution of African-American ghettos in the United-States—the debate over the “underclass” became increasingly prominent.



Source: Federal Reserve Economic Data

It is this widening inequality that would come to constitute a crucial condition of possibility for the political and economic division of the workforce, a division that in the following decades would seriously reconfigure the terms in which the social question would be posed. It would be not so much the question of unemployment as such as the question of its unequal distribution that figured at the center of the debate. And this focus would produce as its corollary both a social and an identitarian fragmentation of the working class. The serious over-representation of certain segments of the workforce (women, immigrants, African-Americans) now put the problem of discrimination at the center of analysis. Where the conflict between capital and labor had structured the analysis of the post-War years, the focus was now on the new crisis of unemployment and in particular on the unequal effects of that crisis.

The Unemployed as “the Other”

This shift rests on the assumption that the unemployed and the employed constitute different populations. But if today, with respect to public policy, it seems natural to separate them, it hasn't always been that way. Marx, for example, thought of them both as belonging to the “proletariat.” Michael Denning notes that in *Capital* and the 1844 manuscripts, Marx refers to the “not-busy” (*die Unbeschäftigten*) rather than to the contemporary category of the “unemployed” (*die Arbeitslosen*).¹¹ The distinction in Marx's time was not between

two distinct segments of the population as much as it was within a population that was “now absorbed, now set free”¹² from the ranks of active labor. In other words, it is not as though there were “two kinds of workers, employed and unemployed, or two sectors of the economy, formal and informal; rather, there is a process in which greater attraction of workers by capital is accompanied by their greater repulsion . . . the workers are sometimes repelled, sometimes attracted again in greater masses.”¹³ It is in this sense that Marx described a fluctuating population, periodically finding itself without work, surviving as best it could while waiting to be reabsorbed by an industrial production that alternated between drawing them in and pushing them out: “laborers are sometimes repelled, sometimes attracted again in greater masses.”¹⁴ In this configuration, the increase of unemployment does not generate a split (*une dualisation*) within the proletariat—it essentially increases the periods of non-employment for every worker.

The current situation, however, has changed. Unemployment obviously existed in Marx’s day, but its structure was different, the crucial change being not so much the increase in unemployment as the form it begins to take. The post-War social welfare state—normalizing work for some and thus normalizing “non-work” for others, helping some to stable, life-long employment while simultaneously allowing others to settle into years of unemployment or social assistance—made the distinction between “active” workers and the unemployed possible. It’s from this perspective that the category of the unemployed as a matter of concern for public policy, in conjunction with the concentration of unemployment, helped to produce, both in theory and practice, a group truly isolated from that of the “salaried population.”¹⁵ As long as we were in a situation of full employment and unemployment was relatively low, the new protections made available to workers posed few problems. Workers continued to have lifestyles and trajectories that were fairly homogeneous, thus facilitating a sense of cohesion and collective organization. Yet, as soon as unemployment began ticking upward and became “structural,” welfare protections benefiting both workers and the unemployed tended to differentiate between the two and thus fracture the

working class into two segments: those with work and those without.

Such a situation would have been impossible in Marx's day, or even as recently as the 1930s, as we can see by casting even a passing glance at Dorothea Lange's or Walker Evans's famous photographs in which the figures and faces of workers intermingle with those of migrants and the unemployed, each occupying in turn the other positions. In these faces, it's difficult to tell the difference between someone who's got a job and someone who hasn't. Or think of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, where the main characters are migrants and workers, employed and unemployed, simultaneously or by turn. Today, unlike when Marx wrote or the 1930s, the experiences of unemployment, poverty, or even of precarious labor are much more heterogeneous and distinct, precisely because of welfare programs (*catégories publiques*) and the concentration of unemployment in certain sectors of the proletariat. Far from defining a single "proletariat" passing from one status to the other according to the vagaries of the moment, our contemporary societies generate an excess population relatively separate from the "classical" model of the wage-earner/salariat: a population fragmented along ethnic or gender lines, alternating between periods of unemployment, odd-jobs, poverty, etc. It is therefore not so surprising that, once separated from the question of their labor, the categories of "the unemployed," "the poor," or the "precarious," are swiftly disconnected from being understood in terms of the exploitation at the heart of capitalist economic relations, and find themselves and their situation apprehended in terms of relative (monetary, social, or psychological) deprivation, filed under the general rubrics of "exclusion," "discrimination," or forms of "domination."

This evolution is marked by the new importance, for the left and the right, of the "excluded," and of the idea that henceforth a "post-industrial" society is divided between those who have access to the labor market and those who, in varying degrees, do not. The focus of the world of labor is thus displaced, shifting towards questions of "exclusion, poverty, and unemployment,"¹⁶ and the intellectual world largely goes along with, and reinforces, this dynamic. As the sociologists Stéphane Beaud and

Michel Pailoux have noted, this displacement indirectly puts workers “on the *inside*, on the side of those who have a job (on the side of the ‘privileged,’ and of those with ‘acquired advantages’).”¹⁷ What’s foregrounded is no longer the general problem of inequality but instead its distribution, its disproportionate effect on the excluded—the unemployed, the young people in the “banlieues,” immigrants.

Furthermore, seen through the lens of this excess population, the representation of the salariat is increasingly ethnicized. Indeed, the overrepresentation of groups (often descendants of immigrants or immigrants themselves) among the ranks of the “surplus population” reinforces the ethnicization of the social question. The declining relevance of the category of class antagonism or, to quote Xavier Vigna, its “increasingly inoperant symbolic and political character,” thus seems to coincide quite clearly with “the activation of identitarian divides founded on the basis of nationality.”¹⁸ The issue here is no longer unemployment as such, but its overrepresentation among certain groups and hence the discrimination to which they have clearly been subjected.

From the “Proletariat” to the “Excluded”...

Alongside this symbolic and political decline of the problem of the working class, one finds the development of new social movements and a radical critique of classical Marxism. In a conference given in Japan in 1978, Michel Foucault asked whether we weren’t beginning to witness “in this period of the end of the 20th century, something like the end of the age of Revolution.” By this, as Michael C. Behrent astutely points out, he meant not an “end of the revolution” resembling the one imagined by François Furet, but “rather [an age] of the proliferation of struggles, the aim of which is to redistribute the power differential in society.”¹⁹ Such a reconfiguration of struggles announced the end of the centrality of the working class and the intensification of the kinds of actions—for the “excluded,” the “marginal,” and the other “subalterns”—dear to Foucault. And it was this increasing importance of occupying buildings for the homeless, distributing food to African immigrants, or demonstrating for prisoners’ rights, etc. that led

Sartre to understand this as a transition towards a “moral Marxism” and to see these actions as essentially “moral gestures,”²⁰ the moral dimension residing precisely in the increasing displacement of questions of exploitation by concerns about “minorities,” the “marginal,” and the “excluded”—in short, by questions of domination and discrimination.

This well-known displacement in Western Marxism compelled many thinkers and movements to redefine their sense of the “social agents who could play the role of the revolutionary subject, as understudies who might replace an indisposed working class: Third World peasants, students, intellectuals, the excluded.”²¹ It was along these same lines, for example, that the Marxist theoretician Herbert Marcuse defended the position that the traditional working class had been thoroughly “integrated” into the capitalist system, and that only “active minorities” and the “young, middle-class intelligentsia” were henceforth capable of radical political action.²² For Marcuse, these “under-privileged” groups, “humiliated, frustrated, oppressed, victims of segregation”²³ might now, allied with students, constitute a decisive element in the unleashing of social revolts. The epicenter of social shocks to come was not to be found in the classical proletariat, but among the “unemployed,” the “blacks in the ghettos,” and other marginalized “ethnic” groups. For Marcuse, it was thus self-evident that “modifications in the structure of capitalism alter the basis for the development and organization of potentially revolutionary forces,”²⁴ a view that would be similarly consecrated by André Gorz’s defense of the idea that the classical worker had disappeared, taking with him “the class able to take charge of the socialist project and translate it into reality.”²⁵ For Gorz, today, “the majority of the population now belong to the post-industrial neo-proletariat which, with no job security or definite class identity, fills the area of probationary, contracted, casual, temporary and part-time employment.”²⁶ Unlike Marx’s proletariat, this subject no longer defines itself “with respect to its position in the process of social production,” but rather by the fact that it appears to belong to no class, by the very exclusion from society that is the source of its radical potential and its potential radicality. As a “non-class,” it doesn’t seek emancipation from within labor, but rather more generally

from labor. Gorz thus offers a fundamental critique not only of Marxism, but of the idea of progress and of the “meaning of History.” It is no longer possible to imagine a highly industrialized society beneficial to all like the one Marx dreamed of. At best, we might be able to conceive, parallel to such a society, of increasing “*areas of autonomy*” freed from labor.²⁷ At which point, it’s no longer a question of seizing “power,” but of constructing, on its margins, other forms of agency, other organizational forms.

It was for this reason that Gorz and Marcuse both saw in the Black Panthers a kind of living incarnation of their theories. Some of Eldridge Cleaver’s ideas in particular seemed to them perfect expressions of their own, as when Cleaver described the central problem of our era as the new contradiction between the lumpenproletariat on one side and an alliance between the working class and the bourgeoisie, on the other. For Cleaver, the working class had thus “turned their jobs into property, which they possessed as a right,” *de facto* excluding those without work from any part in the production and distribution of wealth.²⁸ The end product is a “miserly, stingy bourgeoisie with a greedy working class lickspittleing its boots, standing there with the money bags, tossing out small change like tossing corn to the chickens.”²⁹ The socialization of the means of production that we find in Cleaver’s writings is very different from the one we find in Marx. The *lumpen* will have to struggle to seize physical control of the instruments of production, snatch them out “of the hands of the bourgeoisie, and the working class.”³⁰ Today, far from being a revolutionary force, the working class “has become as much a part of the system that has to be destroyed as the capitalists themselves. They are the second line of resistance, after the cops.”³¹ This working class is no more than a “parasite on the human race,” bought off and corrupted by the lure of safe, secure jobs.³²

This position, despite the fact that for the Panthers it was more a theoretical façade than actual political practice, would find itself echoed in many intellectual contexts and, in fact, could be said to emblemize the theoretical displacements characteristic of the 1970s and after.

Indeed, it is a version of this perspective that—in different degrees—remains central to contemporary leftist Marxist thinkers like Antonio Negri, David Harvey, Slavoj Žižek, Nancy Fraser or Alain Badiou. Negri, who may be the most obvious example of this tendency, argues that in our era, the major agent of social transformation is the “multitude”—composed of a vague “conglomeration of those with unstable employment, youth, women, part-time workers, the unemployed, but also workers, students and immigrants”³³—that replaces that old conception of the “proletariat” and its traditional forms of mobilization. For David Harvey, the whole perspective of urban struggles is elaborated precisely according to the postulate that the traditional workers’ movement based on the workplace has been problematized by the developments of the last 30 years. The very idea of a “right to the city” was first articulated by Henri Lefebvre as a consequence of the fact that in our age the “territorial implantation” of the working class apparently has “as much importance” as “work itself, the space and conditions of labor.”³⁴ Harvey thus insists on the fact that “in much of the advanced capitalist world the factories have either disappeared or been so diminished as to decimate the classical industrial working class.”³⁵ In his view, “the so-called ‘precariat’ has displaced the traditional ‘proletariat’” and “if there is to be any revolutionary movement in our times, at least in our part of the world...the problematic and disorganized ‘precariat’ must be reckoned with.”³⁶ Alain Badiou says essentially the same thing when he declares that the *sans-culottes* of the coming revolution will be composed of “part of the youth, intellectuals, lower middle-class French wage-earners, and then of course those who are always the first to be persecuted—that is, foreigners and the unemployed.”³⁷ Social change will thus depend on an alliance of the “new proletarians who have come from Africa and elsewhere and the intellectuals who are the heirs to the political battles of recent decades.”³⁸

Analyzing the difference between the crisis of the 1930s and today, Nancy Fraser also estimates that “the class division between labor and capital ceases to appear self-evident, becoming obfuscated by the seemingly more salient divide between the thinning ranks of the stably employed, on one hand,

and the swelling precariat on the other.” In such a situation, it strikes her as evident that “organized labor does not speak for society as such. In the eyes of some, it defends the privileges of a minority that enjoys a modicum of social security against the far greater number who do not.”³⁹ Even Slavoj Žižek, while observing the way in which “this focus on the walls that separate the Excluded from the Included may easily be misunderstood as a clandestine return to the liberal tolerant-multicultural topic of ‘openness’ (‘no one should be left out, all minority groups, lifestyles, etc., should be allowed in’),”⁴⁰ nevertheless thinks that there exists today an “antagonism between the ‘Included’ and the ‘Excluded.’”⁴¹ And if he recognizes that this type of thinking can come “at the expense of a properly Marxist vision of social antagonism,” he still argues that “the creation of new forms of apartheid, new Walls and slums” deepens the yawning chasm already separating the “Included from the Excluded”⁴² and is one of the principle antagonisms of contemporary capitalism. In his analysis, we must accept and integrate into our symbolic universe the end of the old conception of the proletariat and forge a “more radical notion of the proletarian subject.” Today, he thinks, “only the reference to the “Excluded” justifies the term communism.”⁴³ Which is, in essence, the same idea advanced by Jacques Rancière when he centers his philosophical discourse around the question of the “part of the partless” (*la part des sans-part*), or by Ulrich Beck, who argues more recently that class as the central fault-line of the social has been replaced by the opposition between “a growing minority of the unemployed, those without steady employment, or those excluded from the labor force and the majority of active, full-time workers.”⁴⁴ And ever since the appearance of William Julius Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged* in 1987, the “underclass” has played a parallel role in the United States, precisely because Wilson’s focus on poverty and unemployment in the “inner city” displaces the question of poverty and unemployment (not to mention inequality) as such.

We can begin to see some of the problems of this schema, however, when we see it deployed not only by left intellectuals but also by politicians and political figures not at all on the left, and whose aim is essentially to limit access to social benefits.

Indeed, we might wonder if, when Margaret Thatcher set the “privileged and protected welfare underclass” against the British “who work for a living,” she wasn’t simply articulating something like an inverted form of Eldridge Cleaver’s argument. And when Nicolas Sarkozy prides himself on his refusal to tolerate “those who don’t want to do anything, who don’t want to work [to] live off the backs of those get up early and who work hard,”⁴⁵ is he not enlisting the same terms as André Gorz? The conservative right’s neoliberal doxa essentially seeks, as Serge Halimi argues, to “redefine the social question in such a way that the line of social division is no longer one that opposes the rich and the poor, capital and labor, but rather runs between two fractions of the ‘proletariat’—between those who ‘have given up enough, lost enough, and have had enough’ and those who are in the ‘welfare republic.’”⁴⁶ Neoliberal attacks thus target this new, urban proletariat with unsteady employment prospects in the same way that, in the U.S. well before it ever spread to Europe, policies cutting the social safety-net were carried out in the name of curing a “culture of dependency” rife among an “underclass” (generally associated with African-American communities). The central thesis of neoliberal thought and authors is that the poverty and unemployment of this “underclass” is the product of their backward-looking cultural horizon and behavior. Or, as ultra-conservative commentator Charles Murray puts it, “they are usually poor, but poverty is a less important indicator than personal behavior destructive to themselves and to their communities.”⁴⁷ When protests or uprisings do indeed occur, explanations such as personal “vice” or indeed “laziness” get trotted out as explanations for these subjects’ poverty and, more generally, their antisocial behavior. The vast majority of the most radically inegalitarian policies, then, “could be traced to the ‘nonworking poor.’”⁴⁸ In this discursive and political configuration, it’s not workers who are “privileged.” On the contrary, it’s the poor who live off a welfare system that encourages their refusal to work. Indeed, this very argument was at the heart of the private speech that Mitt Romney gave to wealthy donors during the 2012 presidential election. In his view, the election was going to be tight for any republican in a country where, according to him, 47% of

Americans “pay no income tax” and are “dependent upon government.” Such voters “believe that they are victims, [they] believe the government has a responsibility to care for them,” were bound to vote for Obama. His goal, then, was “not to worry about *those* people,”⁴⁹ but rather to court the votes of “honest,” hard-working Americans. Like the intellectuals on the left, he is committed to the fundamental difference between the supposedly new precariat and the supposedly old working class.

The economic crisis of 2008 has helped to spread this discourse in Europe. In a lengthy interview with *De Standaard*, the Flemish nationalist leader, Bart De Wever, declared for instance that the contradiction between capital and labor was a thing of the past—henceforth, the new line of demarcation was situated between the “productive” and the “unproductive” members of society. For him, “the State is a money-breathing monster. And where does it get the money? From those who create value. And who consumes this money? The unproductive—they’re so electorally important that this policy just keeps being perpetuated.” In France, Jacques Bompard, a far-right deputy in the French parliament’s lower house, proposed a law that would require people receiving unemployment benefits to work for free. Far from being new, this very idea was part of Nicolas Sarkozy’s platform during his first bid for the presidency. In 2007, he proposed that “those who benefit from social aid perform some service in the public interest—this will incentivize them to take a job rather than live off welfare.” In England, David Cameron justified his party’s social reforms, limiting the amount of monetary aid to the unemployed, by declaring that the system of social solidarity “has become a lifestyle choice for some.”⁵⁰ The changes advocated by these politicians are thus presented as a way of re-establishing a sense of “fairness” in a system that punishes those who “work hard” and rewards those who are content to live a life of “dependency.” This discourse has become a hegemonic view, incarnating a general tendency on the continent to celebrate those “productive members of society” who “get up early” and to disparage the unproductive ne’er-do-wells “on the dole” (*les assistés*) every time a politician or intellectual needs to legitimate austerity reforms or the increase in inequality.

Obviously, the political content of such proclamations on the right differs radically from those of Marxist critics and intellectuals at the end of the 1970s. What they share, however, is the assumption that it's the *surplus population* who, depending on one's position, are either the problem or the solution to the problem. One way or another, both see the surplus population rather than the working class, as the central political agent/subject. How indeed can we fail to notice the paradoxical relation between André Gorz's "non-class" and the "underclass" so dear to Charles Murray? For Gorz, as for neoliberalism, the problem is the relation to labor, not the fact that labor is exploited. Gorz sees in the surplus population a relationship "freed" from work where Thatcher sees the "vice" of idleness that needs to be stamped-out. One raises Paul Lafargue's "right to laziness" to a virtue where the other sees in it an injustice that must be combatted. But, fundamentally, both follow the same logic. On the left as much as on the right, they're happy to have the surplus population be the problem precisely because it displaces the old outmoded and dogmatic idea that the crucial problem was actually exploitation. This transition plays a role, then, in "eclipsing the critique of exploitation by focusing attention on the victim whose rights have been denied—prisoners, homosexuals, refugees, etc."⁵¹ Both sides, right and left, are happy to oppose two segments of the proletariat who, thanks to the neoliberal evolution of the global economy, can be organized around a destructive cycle of competition with one another.

...and from Exploitation to Discrimination

The fundamental problem with this approach is that it replaces abstract analysis (i.e., of exploitation) with a more immediate analysis of the global economic logic of capitalism (i.e., of discrimination) seeking, above all, to denounce status differences within the proletariat. Indeed, the distinction between the unemployed and the employed worker is not a class difference, but solely one of intra-class status. The theoretical and political importance bestowed upon the "subaltern" factions of the proletariat is then justified on the basis of the various forms of discrimination within the proletariat. What counts most is that these factions are "isolated," "humiliated," "frustrated," "victims

of segregation,” “suffering,” or “ethnically marginalized.” Similarly, the rejection of the capital/labor antagonism is defended on the basis that workers nowadays are “reactionary,” “racists” benefiting from “white privilege,” “consumerist,” “bourgeoisified,” and generally “part of capitalist ideology.” The differences underscored by these descriptions essentially articulate the types of oppression and discrimination of which each group is the victim. Some (the surplus population) are “the most oppressed” and others become “the privileged” whose stable, safe existence has ultimately transformed them into individualist consumers whose revolutionary potential has been shattered. At the structural heart of this type of analysis is the process that distributes the effects of inequality rather than those which produce it in the first place. Forms of discrimination, stigmatization, and exclusion from the labor market structure the organization of class, but produce neither unemployment nor unstable employment (*le travail précaire*). As Ken Kawashima notes, “the contemporary proliferation, reproduction, and exploitation of contingent work ought not blind us to the fact that this type of labor, along with the inexorable contingency of the commodification of labor power, are endemic traits of the capitalist market economies and have been since the development of industrial capitalism.”⁵² From this point of view, what we see emerge in the discourse of the surplus population is a desire to substitute a *difference in the way people are treated* (i.e., the different forms that belonging to the proletariat can take) for the *class difference* that generates the very structures of capitalism and exploitation, which is to say, the proletariat itself.

The problem with the turn that numerous authors and thinkers on the left have taken is not that they’re wrong about the reality of this ever-growing “reserve army of labor” and its immiseration; it’s that they’ve replaced the abstract analysis of the structures that produced it with an all-too-often subjective adjudication of who is “the most” dominated, discriminated against, or excluded. By affirming that the major contradiction of our time is between the “included” and the “excluded,” between the *lumpen* on the one hand and the organized working class on the other, they have replaced a *structural difference* (inherent in the mode of organization of capitalist economies) with a

contingent difference (the product of a certain stage of economic development). The main effect of this approach, which necessarily ends up pitting different segments of the wage-earning working class against each other (on the basis of their different identities), is that it makes it difficult to think abstractly about the forces that produce inequality within the proletariat and leaves us stranded at the level of their immediate forms. In effect, for these two types of *differences*, it gives us two types of identities.

The first is *generic* and refers back to the notion of the proletariat. Founded on capitalism's basic organization of social relations, the proletarian *qua* concept consists of the ensemble of agents who are constrained to sell their labor power in order to live, and comprises in equal parts those who are employed and those who are not. After all, the *word* proletariat initially designated a Roman citizen whose only wealth was his children (*proles*). Exceedingly poor, the proletariat constituted the least respected class in Roman society, having only its labor power—and those of its children—as potential source of income. So it is worth underscoring that “proletariat” was not a synonym for “wage-earning worker” (*travailleur salarié*) but for something like “dispossession, expropriation and radical dependence on the market.” In sum, “you don't need a job to be a proletarian.”⁵³ More than (or rather than) an identity, the idea of proletarian constituted a category, derived from the general processes of exploitation and inequality. The proletarian is a function of the economic organization of capitalism.

The second type of identity is more *prescriptive*, based on the immediate form (which is obvious) that the proletariat inhabits in the real economic process, and much less general. Here, one might well distinguish the wage-earner from the poor, the poor from the unemployed, the unemployed from the undocumented, and indeed the “white” worker from “black.”⁵⁴ The deployment of these categories and their political efficacy—both derived from the workings of global capital—tend to emphasize the identitarian dimension of inequality rather than its more impersonal dimension (which is less obvious): i.e., *the accumulation of capital* and the subsequent, or parallel, creation of the reserve army of labor. The status differences separating

the *surnuméraires* from workers do not refer, then, to a structural difference within capitalism. They are instead a function of the forms of domination to which these differences are subject(ed), and which in turn fashion the sorts of identities that proletarians may adopt in the social structure (e.g., unemployed, worker, employee, part-timer/temp, undocumented, immigrant, racialized, etc.). All in all, we can detect in this sort of approach a variation on the liberal themes of diversity and multiculturalism, the end result of which is the transformation of class conflict into ethnic or, more generally, identity conflicts.

Indeed, despite the substantial differences between these two modes of representing social inequalities (one based essentially on “respect” and the other is still preoccupied with the question of “inequality”), the fact remains that both take as their principal concern or adversary the *form* that inequality takes rather than the phenomenon itself. Now, if it is clear that being employed is better than being unemployed (unlike cultural or racial identities, none of which is “better” than any other), what the two logics have functionally in common is a disavowal of the category of exploitation. Both simply reject the centrality of exploitation, and, with it, the contradiction between capital and labor, because their way of conceptualizing the problem isolates the groups they identify from the very relations of exploitation that produce them *qua* group. The problem is therefore not so much inequality as seen through the lens of exploitation, but rather the way in which effects of inequality get distributed throughout society (with certain groups comparatively sheltered from them, and others not). But, of course, a society in which everyone were equally exposed to inequality would hardly be more desirable than the currently existing one in which some segments are disproportionately subjected to it. If unemployment were not concentrated in specific sectors of the population, but distributed more randomly the salariat might of course be less fragmented along identitarian lines, but the global level of unemployment and inequality would not meaningfully diminish. From this standpoint, the problem is not just the political and economic developments since the '70s but the logic of the argument itself. That is, as different as post-industrial society may be from what

preceded it, the focus on the “excluded” nevertheless leaves the fact of inequality as such untouched, and the fact that the post-’70s change in the structure of inequality has been accompanied by this change in efforts to combat it has only instead served to reinforce it. On the one hand, it’s obviously true that none of the leftist (or in the U.S., liberal) authors cited above understand themselves as supporting a society in which inequality is more equally distributed but absolutely undiminished. On the other hand, it’s difficult to deny that the effect of, say, William J. Wilson’s work on the concentration of poverty was anything other than, as Kenneth Warren remarks, to “create the reform context”⁵⁵ in which it was possible for the Clinton administration to commit itself to dispersing poverty rather than dispelling it. More generally, attacking the form inequality took rather than the mechanism that produced it in the first place could only, from the standpoint of social critique, amount to a regression.

From this standpoint, it’s easy to follow Fredric Jameson when he maintains that putting the emphasis on the “excluded” is an “essentially moral or ethical gesture, which leads to punctual revolts and acts of resistance rather than the transformation of the mode of production as such.”⁵⁶ The notion of exploitation leads us, then, to the very heart of the production of inequality, whereas forms of discrimination or, in Jameson’s terms, domination, only bring us back to its mode of *reproduction*. In this sense, the relations that each perspective, that of exploitation or that of domination/discrimination, maintains with respect to the question of inequality are very different. It thus seems clear that “the outcome of an emphasis on exploitation is a socialist program, while that of an emphasis on domination is a democratic one, a program and a language only too easily and often coopted by the capitalist state.”⁵⁷ And this is precisely, as Walter Benn Michaels has pointed out, one of the principle ideological effects of neoliberalism—i.e., changing the subject from “differences between what people own (class) to the differences between what people are (identity).”⁵⁸ One’s position in the (class) relation capital/labor is no longer the object of a fundamental contradiction. Rather, what takes center stage is what/where one *is* (one’s identity) in the relations of domination

within one's own class (unemployed, underemployed, immigrant, etc.).

The “Virtually Poor” Worker and Abstraction as Method

In his short essay on the “Soul of Man under Socialism,” Oscar Wilde wrote “it is much more easy to have sympathy with suffering than it is to have sympathy with thought.”⁵⁹ “[F]ind[ing] themselves surrounded by hideous poverty” men are naturally affected by it and generally tend to develop a sort of spontaneous empathy for the poor; human emotions, Wilde says, are “stirred more quickly than man's intelligence.”⁶⁰ And yet, despite its best intentions, such empathy tends to hinder rather than enhance our capacity for critical reflection on the sources of poverty in the first place. It focuses our attention on the immediate identity of the poor and not on the social conditions of his or her production *qua* impoverished subject. The problem is not so much that we feel emotions but that we make a politics out of them. Thus for Wilde, the truly socialist gesture is one that takes man's “intelligence” as its point of origin, replacing affective response to poverty with abstract reflection on the structures that produce it. The observation that poverty, and the poor, exist doesn't bother the author. What bothers Wilde is the mode of analysis and comprehension by which one grasps the question of poverty. Is the pauper fundamentally different from the worker moved to pity by the former's condition, or is this difference itself but skin deep?

Here we come back to the two types of identities and differences we evoked earlier. On a superficial glance, it may indeed seem that the poor person's “identity” is different from the worker's. One does not work (or works only intermittently), and the other has a job and a reliable salary. On the immediate or empirical level then, these two positions are fundamentally different, indeed opposite. But take a closer look—one appealing to what Wilde called “intelligence” and thus paying attention to the relations as such rather than to the identity of specific groups—and these differences go up in smoke. Of course the wage-earning worker is less poor than someone who is unemployed, but both are the products of the same antagonism with capital and the same struggle over exploitation. The real gap between

the poor and workers or between the unemployed and the employed should not blind us to the fact that the argument and position that the left has to adopt and defend is one that demystifies rather than reinforces the ideological smoke-screen put between the two. This task can only be accomplished, as Jameson affirms, by “a return to abstract categories”⁶¹—a methodological principle at the heart of Marx’s work. Marx himself says that we always have to start from the “concrete real” (the world as it presents itself to our understanding and the evidence of experience). Yet, such experiences, such evidence, are themselves products, outcomes. The concrete “real” appears, for Marx, “in reasoning as a summing-up, a result, and not as the starting point.”⁶² If the concrete real presents itself to our experience as it is, this is not because the real has always been thus, but rather because it is the “synthesis of many determinations” that we have to reconstruct at the level of “concrete (of) thought/an interpretation of the concrete.” The abstraction to which Marx proceeds in order to think the “concrete real” will then include a consideration of “the way in which things arrive at what they are”—that is, the history of their development.⁶³ Marx seeks, then, to assimilate to every concrete determination (the unemployed or the worker, for instance), its “transient nature not less than its momentary existence.”⁶⁴ So, in order to go beyond or negate the illusion that the subject of poverty is “other” than or “different” from me, we must free ourselves from immediate perceptual categories and conceptualize the conditions of both work and non-work as evolving forms of exploitation in the neoliberal economy. What from one point of view is an opposition (between unemployment and unemployment) is at a higher level of abstraction just the difference between a worker who has got a job and one who does not. The level of analysis is different but the social and historical process that produced here is the same.

It is this level and this identity that are grasped by the Marxist categories of the “surplus population” and of the wage-earner as a “virtual pauper.” The first category is essentially laid out in chapter 25 of the first volume of *Capital*, in the course of Marx’s discussion of the “general law of capitalist accumulation” and his development of the idea of an “industrial reserve army, that

belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost.”⁶⁵ This army, he says, is the “pivot” on which “the law of demand and supply of labor works.”⁶⁶ In Marx’s view, “the general movements of wages are exclusively regulated by the expansion and contraction of the industrial reserve army.”⁶⁷ In other words, he never separates the production of the “surplus population” (the floating population, the reserve army of labor, etc.) from the production of “workers.” In the course of its development, capitalism proletarianizes increasingly larger portions of society while simultaneously producing an excess labor population condemned to suffer the “hell of pauperism.” In the 1857-58 manuscripts (more generally referred to as the *Grundrisse*), Marx draws emphatic attention to the dialectical link between what he calls the category of “free workers” and poverty. Here, Marx in effect defines the worker as a “virtual pauper.” As he puts it in the *Grundrisse*, “it is already contained in the concept of the *free laborer* that he is a pauper: virtual pauper.”⁶⁸ Beyond immediate appearances, then, Marx’s analysis allows us to comprehend poverty not as a state, but as a process, and see the notion of poverty as always already wrapped up in that of the worker. Simply put, for Marx the pauper is “latent in free labor,”⁶⁹ pauperism is an integral, virtual dimension of free labor. Yet we have to proceed cautiously with this idea, for the risks of drawing the wrong conclusions from it are considerable. If Marx defends and proclaims the importance of thinking both aspects of labor simultaneously and in relation to one another, he does not go so far as to say that the proletarian *is* a pauper. He rejects this division at an abstract level, but not at the level of concrete determinations, where the difference in their material situations matters. His point is rather than under capitalism, the conditions in which work is performed are conditions in which the worker cannot help but create the possibility of his own pauperization.

Thus the worker is a worker, but in working he negates his status *qua* worker by destroying the very conditions of his reproduction as worker—he *metamorphoses* into a pauper. Thus paid labor makes its own contribution to the “the misery of constantly extending strata of the active army of labor.”⁷⁰ The double figures of the free worker and the pauper are the

common and contradictory product of a single social process (the accumulation of capital), and not two different states stemming from opposed social processes. Taking this premise as his point of departure, Fredric Jameson aligns himself with Marx's assertion that we need to "think of unemployment as a category of exploitation,"⁷¹ and not just as a precarious "status" or a separate situation in relation to the exploitation of the salariat. For Jameson, we cannot isolate the "excluded" from the "structural necessity for capitalism to create a reserve army of the unemployed and to exclude whole sections of society (or here, in globalization, whole sections of the world population)." ⁷²

Common Ground: Organizing Co-operation

To return to the abstract process, and the process of abstraction, in the way that Marx understood and deployed it is thus a radical political gesture that may just permit us to demystify the supposed differences within the salariat and the identitarian positions that are imagined to result from them. By adopting an identitarian approach, method, or reading of the problem, opposing the "unemployed" to "active workers," "immigrants" to "whites," "the undocumented" to the "native born," the left has succeeded in doing little more than play into the hands of the political hegemony of neoliberal "common sense" discourse. The conservative right's work consists, then, in simply reproducing and inverting the very positions of the "Marxist" left, adding a formal dimension supported by appeals to common sense. Indeed, if the idea that workers today are a "privileged" group that needs to be brought down seems more than a little counter-intuitive, the claim that our social problems are the fruits of a culture of dependency (often associated with the figure of an immigrant other) has been reproduced and diffused in the mass media for decades. It is just this "common sense" that imbued Thatcher's arguments with a kind of power, and which leads André Gorz down a discursive dead-end. Thus, although the right's moralism (educate the poor through work) and its appeals to ethnocentrism may be nothing new, the support it receives from the double abandonment by the left of the working classes and of a discourse grounded in the struggle against exploitation is; and it is in this support that the right's

current ideological hegemony is anchored. It would seem self-evident that any discourse that aggravates the division between the “surplus population” and the “active population” can do nothing to help the exploited. The strategy adopted by the left since the 1970s, that of turning its (discursive and political) attention to the “excluded,” the “poor” and the “underemployed” or “discrimination” seems in the final analysis to engender a defeat on two fronts simultaneously, leaving open an economic and ideological breach that the right has triumphantly filled. In other words, the proponents of the critique of classical Marxism have ultimately been “supplying the right with just the kind of left it wants.”⁷³ As Stephano Azzara puts it, “the victory of neoliberalism can be measured by the degree to which it has been able—sometimes explicitly but more often without anyone realizing it—to penetrate and restructure the vision of its opponents.”⁷⁴

Today, more than ever, the success or failure of the struggles to come depends on the capacity of political and class organizations (e.g., unions) to draw attention to the socio-economic stakes represented by the “surplus population,” and to convince the so-called “stable” working class that their fates are intertwined. Indeed, at the very dawn of the industrial era, Marx had already posited that a decisive stage in the development of the class struggle would be the moment when workers “discover that the degree of intensity of the competition among themselves depends wholly on the pressure of the relative surplus population” and thus on their being able “to organize a regular co-operation between employed and unemployed in order to destroy or to weaken the ruinous effects of this natural law of capitalistic production on their class.”⁷⁵

Translated by Robert St. Clair, The College of William and Mary.

Editor's note: for a response to Daniel Zamora, please read Todd Cronan's "The Political Ontology of Unemployment: Why No One Need Apply."

NOTES

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